

Theory of Change

What is a theory of change and why develop one?

The phrase “theory of change” has become extremely popular over the last few years and has acquired an air of mystique. This is a shame as it is neither new or complicated! It is simply an expression of the underlying logic of any intervention - the programme logic. It is the explanation of how and why you think that the actions you are proposing will create the positive changes that you want. It is your explanation of how your actions will lead to the positive impact that is required. Although not a term in common usage, I find it helpful to differentiate between a theory of change – which is specific to a particular time and place, i.e. your project or programme – and a **‘Philosophy of Change’** which is a more generic idea about how change happens and which is not specific to any particular context. Anyone who has ever produced a project plan has developed a theory of change; it is what was in your head as you decided what activities you would do to address the problem as you understood it so that the situation would improve.

What is new, however, is capturing this thinking explicitly in both words and diagrams. In the past, our thinking tended to stay locked up in our heads. As a result, things that might have seemed logical in our heads weren’t always exposed to more critical external examination; differences of understanding weren’t necessarily identified and, when staff moved on, the underlying thinking and assumptions were often lost, making it extremely difficult to review and refine our thinking.

Developing a theory of change forces this logic out into the cold light of day where it can be examined, tested and refined. Doing so not only greatly improves the rigour of project planning and the quality of the resultant logframe but also provides a common understanding and foundation for all stakeholders, enabling more effective collaborative action. By clearly stating the logic within our plan we are also better able to identify high risk assumptions and to deliberately test and confirm these early in the life of the project. By capturing our logic we can explore why changes happen and be better placed to identify, and justify, the contribution that we have made. Developing a theory of change will improve the quality of your project, help you to justify the contribution your efforts have made to changes in the environment and help you and others to learn and improve.

When to conduct it?

The theory of change is the expression of the logical foundation of any project and therefore needs to be developed right from the start. It should form part of the original project design process. It should flow naturally from the **problem analysis** and is a precursor to the development of a '**logframe**', forming part of the project '**baseline**'. Although conducted at the very beginning of a project, it should be reviewed regularly as understanding evolves throughout the life of an intervention - certainly as part of any mid-term review. Reflecting on the theory of change is also part of any final evaluation as it helps identify the contribution that the project has made to broader impacts in the environment.

Who should take part?

It is wise to be as inclusive as possible with the problem analysis. Indeed, as the theory of change is the next natural step in the project planning process it is likely that the same people will take part. As before, in-country staff should be an essential part of any analysis team and it is similarly important to include any partners in the analysis, alongside anyone on whose contribution success will depend. If the object analysis has identified certain issues or sectors as being critical, it is also wise to draw on experts in these particular areas as well. Developing the theory of change is best done collaboratively as it ensures that a shared view of how change is expected to occur will develop, thus ensuring that all are pulling in a common direction.

How to develop a theory of change: useful tools

Developing a theory of change is probably best done as part of a group brainstorming session. The most effective place to start is with a completed **problem analysis**. It is also helpful before starting to have an idea of what sort of resources (time, money, skills etc.) that you may be able to draw on, as this will define what the art of the possible is. Looking at your object analysis, ask:

- What would "success" look like and what would need to be in place for this to happen?
- What is preventing these things from being in place and how can these obstacles be overcome?
- Are there any existing positive influences that could be strengthened so that they have a greater positive impact?

- Are there any new influences that could be created or developed that would counteract or negate the existing negative drivers and influences?
- What could be done that would reduce or mitigate the negative effects or consequences of this problem?
- What could be done to reduce or overcome the influence of these drivers or causes of the problem?

While the stakeholders themselves are likely to have good ideas about what could be done, experience from other similar situations can help provide ideas as can a review of existing philosophies of change. Adopting (and adapting) theories of change that have been applied successfully elsewhere can help increase confidence in the project approach and reduce project risk, although care must be taken as the context will always be different.

The output of your analysis should be a description in words explaining why and how the activities that you have selected will address and resolve the problem that you have identified, accompanied by a diagram that helps visualise this logic. Of the two, the words are the most important with the diagram being the visual aide for the words. There are a number of tools that can be used. Turning a '**Problem Tree**' into a '**Solution Tree**' is one approach although this can lead to some fairly superficial deductions if not handled with care. Changing the '**5 Whys**' to '**5 Hows**' can also be helpful (still an irritating tool though!), '**Force Field Analysis**' can be particularly helpful as can '**Influence Diagrams**' and '**Systems Diagrams**'.

Eight Top Tips for Developing a Theory of Change

1. Don't 'solutioneer' (at least to start with)

- There will often be an immediate desire to list a range of activities that the participants are familiar with. Resist this urge as it will almost certainly lead to gaps in the programme logic and flawed assumptions. Instead, try to work from the problem outwards -identifying the key building blocks of a transformed situation (some or all of these are likely to become project outcomes). Only when you have identified these building blocks should you then draw out the activities. This ensures a clear logical link between activity and desired outcome.

2. Think of the dynamics

- Rather than get fixated by a set of objectives or outcomes try to think more in terms of forces or influences; situations are dynamic and what matters most is

how the balance of forces or influences on an object play out. Is the balance of various influences positive or negative; if negative how can you change them?

3. Focus on the links not the blocks

- As you begin to compile the building blocks of success, express in words the link that joins building blocks to the desired impact. State explicitly *why* and *how* you think that this will lead to the next building block. It is these words that form your theory of change. Forcing yourself to express your thinking in words also tends to highlight flaws in your logic.

4. This a hypothesis, so don't get too dogmatic

- A theory of change is a hypothesis. It is your view of how change happens and is therefore based on a host of assumptions some of which will most likely prove to be wrong. We are dealing with complex challenges and there are rarely clearly defined answers and so being wrong (at least in part) is normal. Therefore concentrate on developing a clearly articulated logic that can provide a clear basis for evolution rather than an exhaustive search for the 'correct' answer.

5. Record your explanation

- As you begin to form your theory of change and have an early draft of your diagram, record yourself explaining it to someone who has not been involved in the process. As you talk, you will see gaps in your thinking and will automatically begin to try to fill them in. Your explanation will probably become garbled but the words that you come up with reveal what is in your head and highlight some of the missing logic. Listen to the recording and refine your diagram and the explanation until you are no longer having to ad lib to fill in the gaps.

6. Identify the higher risk links and explore how you can test them

- As you go through the process and articulate the links that connect the various building blocks of success, look out for those in which you have least confidence. Are there some that if proved false would have a significant impact on the outcome? Of these, which have least evidence or experience to support them? These become your highest risk assumptions. Consider if there are ways in which you could test some of these in advance, perhaps through some form of pilot. If this isn't possible, focus your monitoring effort on these links, thinking through not only how you would spot if the logic is proving correct, but also how you would recognise that the logic was flawed. This allows you to rapidly adapt and improve.

7. Separate the thinking from production of the final output

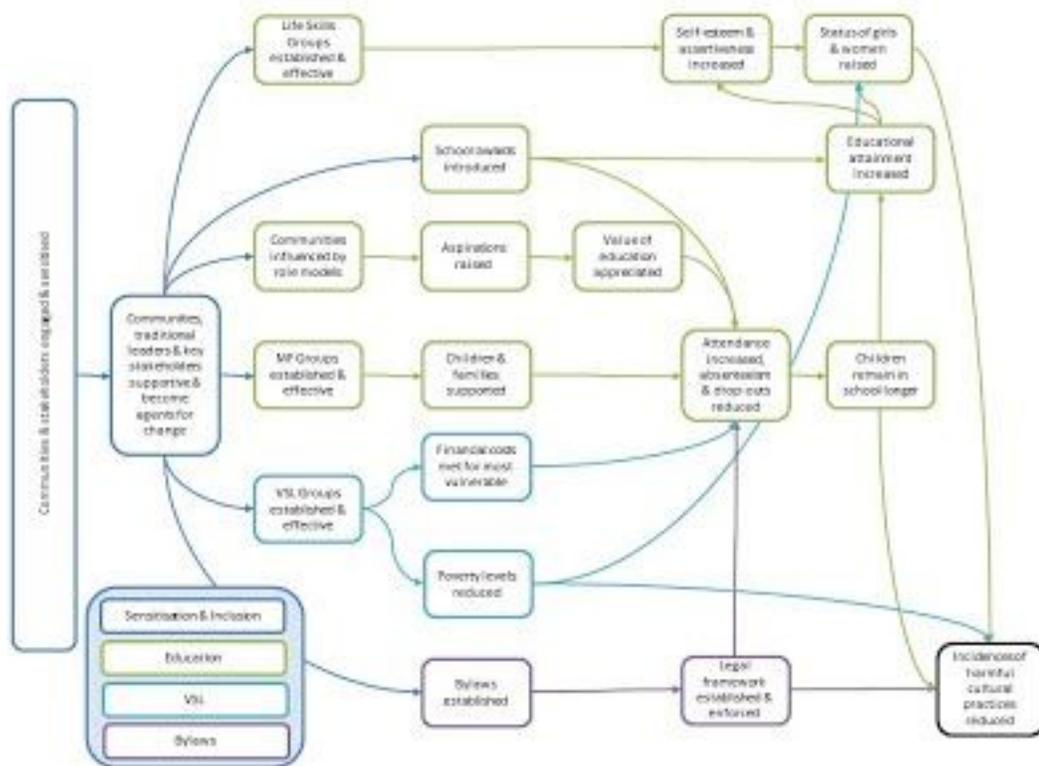
- Sometimes you may be mandated to submit the outcome of your analysis in a specific format or template. It can be tempting to try to fill in this template as you go along. This should be resisted! Such templates are usually designed to assist the reader assimilate the information quickly and compare and contrast different submissions - trying to fill them in directly as the analysis is conducted will usually constrain thinking and limit creativity. It is of course wise to look at what information is required in the template and then ensure that this falls out of the analysis but don't try to fill it in directly - produce it afterwards instead drawing upon the wealth of thinking that has fallen out of your analysis. If time is really pressed then a compromise might be to have one person sitting in on the analysis who can record the thinking as it happens and populate the template as they go along. This can then be shared with the rest of the group at the end who can then amend it as required.

8. Test your thinking on others

- Once you have conducted your analysis and written it up it is always good practice to let someone who has not been directly involved in the analysis look through it and comment. A fresh eye will almost invariably highlight weaknesses in logic or expression or omissions that when addressed will lead to a better product.

Example

What follows is a theory of change developed as part of an evaluation of a programme in Malawi. The example below can be downloaded as a single sheet of A3 from the [templates shelf](#) of the [library](#)



The project will address the **problem of harmful cultural practices** through a holistic approach. This will be centered on **empowerment through education and** supported by the **development of bylaws** to dissuade people from harmful practices. It will also include the **introduction of village savings and loans schemes** to directly address the material poverty of the most vulnerable and increase the sustainability of the outcomes. These three themes will form the three pillars of the project - all of which are **founded on a commitment to sensitising the community** to the changes, ensuring that they are fully included in the project, thus generating support from key stakeholders.

Sensitisation and inclusion

If the project team works with district authorities, church leaders, traditional chiefs and the communities to explain, educate, persuade and train, then the existence and impact of harmful practices will be recognised and a group of agents for change will be created. These can, in turn, sensitise and motivate others to change. In addition, the relationships that have been developed through such ongoing engagement can be used to advocate for the introduction of an appropriate legal framework. These will help to prevent harmful practices and allow for additional resources to be provided to schools and villages where required.

Bylaws

If laws exist that are supported by the majority of the population and are enforced through the system of traditional chiefs and, if the laws offer the threat of fines, then the financial cost-benefit of early marriages and of dropping out of education to start small businesses will change and school drop-out rates will reduce. As a result, boys will remain in school and be less likely to demand young wives and girls also will therefore remain in school longer. Consequently, both boys and girls will be better educated and more aware of the dangers of existing practices. Due to their education, girls and women will be able to contribute more to the wealth and welfare of the family and therefore the status of girls and of women will rise.

Education

If vulnerable children are supported financially and through the encouragement of those in their community then they will be more likely to continue in education. If awards are presented annually to the most successful learners then students will be motivated to work harder in class and, in order to stand the best chance of earning an award, absenteeism will reduce. If learners, parents and key leaders are introduced to role models who have completed education and gone on to good jobs then the aspirations of the community for their children will rise and the environment will become more conducive to continuing in education. If a series of connected groups are established within communities that include individuals of influence, then those at risk of falling prey to harmful practices can be identified and supported; instances of harmful practices can be prevented or, where they have happened, the victims can be supported.

Village Savings and Loans.

If VSL schemes are introduced to villages, focused on the most vulnerable families then these families will generate income that can be used to keep their children in education. If the VSL groups also introduce a social welfare fund as one of the recipients then villages will be able to continue to support vulnerable children in their education and to provide awards as an incentive to motivate all pupils. This will ensure the sustainability of the positive effects beyond the life of the project. Additionally, the schemes will allow participants to raise capital and fund projects to raise themselves out of poverty - thus addressing one of the underlying causes of the problem.